

Group seeks to boost small businesses

BY CAROL COULTAS
Business Writer

AUGUSTA — A coalition of House lawmakers is unveiling a plan Thursday designed to help Maine's small business owners.

Dubbed the Small Business Legislative Package, the plan introduces 14 bills intended to streamline regulations and promote opportunities for small business throughout the state.

"I think these bills will make a real difference," said Rep. Nancy Smith, D-Monmouth, who is the House co-chairman of the committee on Business, Research and Economic Development. She and Rep. John Patrick, D-Rumford, were local legislators who served on the coalition.

The bills came from a series of seven public forums that the coalition sponsored over the past year. Under the direction of House Speaker John Richardson, D-Brunswick, and Rep. Stan Moody, R-Manchester, small business owners were in-

vited to forums to express their frustrations about doing business in Maine.

More than 100 took up the invitation, including dozens of local business people who attended an Auburn forum held in September. Members of the

coalition took the concerns they heard and fashioned the 14 bills they are submitting for this legislative session.

"They incorporated the feedback they got from the forums into this legislative package," said David

Connerty-Marin, spokesman for the speaker's office. "I think that lends it credibility."

The bills are grouped loosely around three themes: creating an environment that fosters growth for small businesses, mobilizing state resources to help small businesses, and streamlining the

regulatory process. Expected to attend the kickoff Thursday are Dana Connors of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, Deb Cook of the Maine Small Business Alliance, and David Clough of the Maine chapter of the National Federation of In-

dependent Businesses.

Smith said she is particularly interested in two bills — one that establishes an ombudsman position for business and the other that creates a business information hot line. Both can help constituents navigate

available resources when they want to start a business or expand an existing one.

"It can be a little overwhelming," Smith said. "These (bills) will help them with that process."

ccoultas@sunjournal.com

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SMALL BUSINESS LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE

- L.R. 106: Develop a statewide curriculum to encourage life-long entrepreneurship and to provide Maine people with the tools needed to be successful. Status: Drafting
- L.R. 142: Promote equal access to justice by creating a consumer and commercial court. Status: Drafting
- L.R. 1545: Establish a study committee to make recommendations for promoting and sustaining Maine entrepreneurs.
- L.R. 1544: Reinstate the MERITS scholarship program, which gives students working

experience in the fields of science and technology. Status: Drafting

- L.D. 399: Create the Future for Youth in Maine Loan Repayment Program to recruit and retain college graduates to start new technology-based businesses and to work in occupations and industries facing labor shortages in the state. Status: Referred to the Business, Research and Economic Development committee
- L.R. 1687: Authorize a \$50,000,000 bond issue to support education loan repay-

ment for Maine residents. Status: Drafting

- L.R. 1874: Provide Maine businesses and people with access to affordable broadband Internet access. Status: Drafting
- L.R. 105: Direct state agencies to do more outreach to small business community, and offer procurement assistance through the Market Development Center. Status: Drafting
- L.R. 1254: Authorize a bond issue of \$6,000,000 to support

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Package

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the growth of small businesses: \$5 million to fund the Small Enterprise Growth Fund; \$1 million for seed capital grants. Status: Drafting

- L.R. 1546: Establish "3-1-1" as a statewide business information and referral service. Status: Drafting

• L.D. 192: Encourage Maine's natural resource-based recreation industries by providing them with the same sort of considerations provided to other industries that operate in Pine Tree Enterprise Zones. Status: Referred to the Business, Research and Economic Development committee

- L.R. 107: Create the position of the small business

ombudsman in the governor's office to advocate for the concerns of Maine's small businesses. Also reinvestigates the Maine Regulatory Fairness Board, charging it to recommend regulatory and statutory changes to enhance the state's business climate.

Status: Drafting

- L.D. 169: Repeal changes made to the resale certificate law by the last Legislature, returning resale certificates to retailers with annual gross sales of \$10,000 or more. Status: Referred to the Taxation Committee

- L.D. 136: Grant commercial insurance consumers the same rights of cancellation appeal that residential insurance consumers enjoy. Status: Referred to the Insurance and Financial Services Committee